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Preventing Rabies Exposures: Guidelines for Recreational Camps

Every year, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) receives questions about encounters with wild or stray animals at children's camps. **Because wild animals, particularly raccoons, skunks, foxes, coyotes, woodchucks (groundhogs) and bats, may carry rabies, it is important that camps take precautions to minimize encounters between campers and wild animals.** Rabies is a fatal, viral infection that can be spread to domestic animals or humans through contact with an infected animal's saliva, usually through a bite or scratch.

The following precautions are advised for children's camps:

- Camp staff and camp attendees should be informed about the risk of rabies associated with exposure to wild or stray animals. Tell children not to handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic, even if they seem friendly; call the police or animal control officer to handle wild animals. Campers should be encouraged to report any contact with wild or stray animals to the camp nurse or other adult in charge.
- Do not attract wild animals to your camp. Keep the property free of stored birdseed or other foods that may attract wild animals. Fasten trash can lids tightly as access to trash will attract animals.
- Buildings should be inspected for bats every spring before camp opens. Attic spaces, rafters, porches, and walls should be inspected for signs of roosting bats, such as bat guano. If evidence of bats is found, camp buildings and cabins, particularly those used as sleeping quarters, should be bat-proofed. For suggestions on bat-proofing, refer to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) website at: www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/rabies/bats/_&_rabies/bats&.htm. If you do not have internet access, you may request a copy of the CDC brochure, "Bats and Rabies" by calling the MDPH, Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at (617) 983-6800 or toll free at 1-888-658-2850.
- Any bat that has exposed a person should be safely captured and submitted for rabies testing. An exposure may be a bite or scratch; however, sometimes a bite or scratch by a bat may be too small to be noticed. Therefore, if a bat is found in a building, and you cannot rule out that a person was exposed (e.g., a sleeping person awakes to find a bat in the room, or an adult witnesses a bat in the room with a previously unattended child, mentally disabled person, or intoxicated person), the bat should be safely captured and submitted for testing. A bat can be captured by covering it with a box or can and then sliding a piece of cardboard under the container to trap the bat inside. Depending on your town and city ordinances, the local animal control officer may be able to offer you assistance in

Rabies

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What is rabies?

Rabies is a very serious disease that affects the brain and spinal cord of mammals (if an animal has hair or fur, it is a mammal). Cats, dogs, raccoons, coyotes and foxes are mammals, as are people. Rabies is caused by a virus and almost always causes death. Rabies is usually a disease of animals, but it can spread from an infected animal to a person.

How is rabies spread?

Rabies spreads when an animal with rabies bites another animal or person. The rabies virus is in the saliva (spit) of infected animals. Infected animals can also spread rabies if their saliva gets into a scratch or other wound, or the eyes, nose or mouth of another person or animal.

Does rabies cause death in people in the U.S.?

Yes, but it is very rare for people to get rabies in the United States. Of the 55,000 people who die of rabies every year around the world, only one or two of those deaths occur in the United States.

How common is rabies in animals in Massachusetts?

Fairly common. Since 1992, more than 5,000 animals have tested positive for rabies in Massachusetts. Most of these cases occurred in wild animals like raccoons, skunks, bats, woodchucks and foxes, but every year some pets (especially cats) and farm animals also get rabies. Fortunately, there is a vaccine to protect dogs and cats from rabies.

Is there something special about bats and rabies?

Yes. Most of the recent human cases of rabies in the US have been caused by bats. Any possible contact with bats should be taken seriously. This includes a bite or scratch, waking up with a bat in the room or finding a bat in a room with a young child or mentally impaired person. Bat teeth are so small that a person may not realize they have been bitten, so bat exposures need to be carefully evaluated.

What kinds of animals don't get rabies?

Birds, fish, reptiles (such as snakes, turtles and lizards), amphibians (such as frogs and salamanders) and insects (bugs) cannot get or spread rabies.

Can you tell if an animal is rabid?

You cannot tell if an animal has rabies just by looking at it. Rabid animals may act strangely after the virus affects their brains, or they may seem just fine. Sometimes, rabid animals may aggressively attack people or other animals. Sometimes, a test is done on an animal's brain to find out if it had rabies.



How is rabies prevented in people?

After a person is exposed to rabies, they can be given shots (called “immune globulin”) around the bite or scratch to help fight the virus where it entered the body. They will also get 4 or 5 vaccinations (shots) in their arm over several weeks. These shots will also help the person fight the virus. As long as the shots are given before the person starts to get sick, this will prevent them from getting rabies. If a person does not get the shots and then gets sick with rabies, there is no effective treatment. Rabies is almost always fatal.

What should you do if you think you’ve been exposed to rabies?

If you are bitten or scratched by an animal:

- Wash the wound with soap and water **right away** for ten minutes.
- Call your health care provider or local board of health. They can help you determine if you need to be treated for a rabies exposure.
- Your local animal control officer may be able to catch the animal that scratched or bit you. Wild animals should be tested immediately for rabies. Cats, dogs, ferrets and cows can be watched for 10 days. If they stay healthy, they did not expose you to rabies.

What should you do if you find a bat in your home?

- If the bat is found in a room with a sleeping person, an unattended young child, a mentally incapacitated person or a pet, the bat should be safely captured and tested for rabies. Information about how to safely capture a bat can be found in the document called *Capturing a Bat: What You Need and How To Do It* at www.mass.gov/dph/rabies.
- Call your local board of health for help in getting the bat tested for rabies.
- Call your healthcare provider, your local board of health or the Massachusetts Department of Public Health to help you determine if you need to be treated for a rabies exposure.

What should you do if you think your pet has been exposed to rabies?

If your pet is bitten or scratched by another animal:

- Call your veterinarian to help you determine if the animal needs medical attention.
- Your local animal control officer may be able to catch the animal that scratched or bit your pet. Wild animals should be tested immediately for rabies.
- In some cases, it may be necessary to confine your animal and watch it to see if it develops signs of rabies. Your local animal inspector can help you determine if this is necessary.

How can you help prevent rabies in Massachusetts?

- Teach children to never approach animals they don’t know – even if they appear friendly.
- Report any animal that behaves oddly to your local animal control official.
- Enjoy wild animals from a distance. Do not keep wild animals as pets. This is against the law in Massachusetts.
- Make sure your pets are vaccinated against rabies. By law, all dogs, cats and ferrets must be regularly vaccinated against rabies.



- Don't feed or water your pets outside. Even empty bowls will attract wild and stray animals.
- Keep your pets in a fenced yard or on a leash and do not let them roam freely.
- Keep your garbage securely covered. Open garbage will attract wild or stray animals.
- Keep your chimney capped and repair holes in attics, cellars, and porches to help keep wild animals like bats and raccoons out of your home.

Where can you get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic, or local board of health (listed in the phone book under local government)
- Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at (617) 983- 6800 or toll-free at 1-888-658-2850 or on the MDPH website at www.mass.gov/dph/rabies
- Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, Division of Animal Health at (617) 626-1810 or on the MDAR website at www.mass.gov/agr

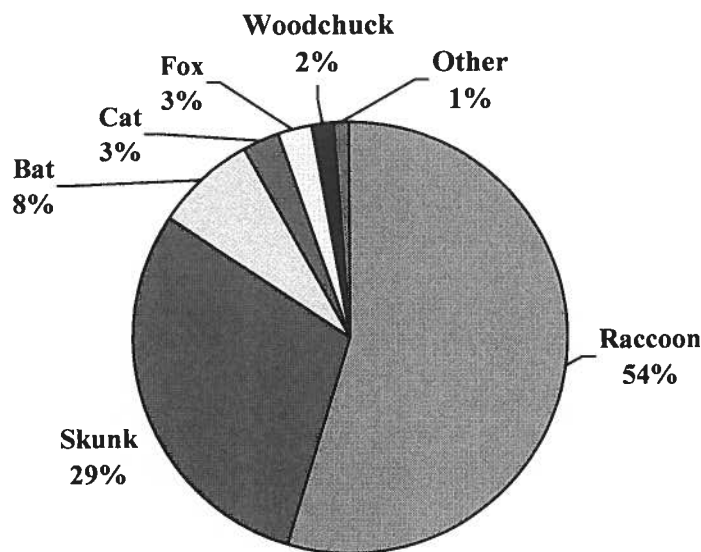


safely capturing a bat. Information on safely capturing a bat is also available on the CDC website noted above. The local animal control officer and local board of health can assist the camp with information about submitting a bat to the MDPH Rabies Laboratory for rabies testing.

- If known contact occurs between a person and a wild or stray animal, the wound or area of skin contact should be thoroughly washed immediately with soap and water. Call a health care provider and the local board of health; they will help you decide if the person needs to be treated to prevent rabies. Depending on your town and city ordinances, your local animal control officer may be able to offer assistance in capturing the animal. The local animal control officer and local board of health can assist with information about submitting the animal to the MDPH Rabies Laboratory for rabies testing, if appropriate.

The following chart shows the types of animals that tested positive for rabies in Massachusetts between 1992-2006:

**Massachusetts Department of Public Health
Breakdown of Positive Rabies Tests by Animal, 1992-2006**



Children should be taught that all wild animals and strays should be observed from a distance, and that direct contact with any wild or stray animal should be avoided. If questions arise concerning human contact with animals that may carry rabies, call the MDPH's Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at (617) 983-6800 or toll free at 1-888-658-2850. In emergencies, an epidemiologist can be reached after-hours and on weekends through this number. Additional information on rabies is also available on the MDPH website at www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/epii/rabies/rabies.htm.

July 2007